

## **The Science Behind 'Dress for Success'**

*No one remembers what you wore on the first day of school, but that doesn't mean there aren't advantages to looking "cool."*

On my first day of high school, I walked nervously into a crowd of 1,200 other freshmen, desperately searching for my best friend in the sea of unfamiliar faces. I anxiously scanned Jansport Backpacks and Hollister shirts, hoping for a familiar flash of Converse sneakers or Delia's jeans. But luckily, finding her proved far easier than I anticipated. On our first day of ninth grade, just one person in the entire class decided to wear a fedora. It was my best friend.

In the years since, we have joked about this less-than fashion-forward choice of hers. The odds that I wore anything close to trendy on that August 2008 day are slim to none, but I haven't the slightest clue what my outfit looked like—and no one else remembers my clothing choice either.

According to Google's nGram tool, the term "back to school" didn't come into the American lexicon until 1960, seemingly riding on the heels of 1950s post-war consumerism and consistent growth in Americans' disposable income. The term's use steadily grew until 2004, when its prevalence started to level off. But over time, the pressing notion that what a student wears on the first day of school must be, above all else, cool, has stayed consistent.

An incredible 1986 ad from the now-defunct Canadian retailer Zellers features a trio of sharply dressed elementary-school students sauntering off to their first day of school. The commercial opens with the statement, "It's back to school, and you want to look good. You want the latest styles, and your parents want the lowest prices." The commercial hammers home the idea that what a student wears on the first day makes an impression and is something worth investing in. The jean-jacket swagger of these kids from the 1980s is not so different from the 2013 JC Penney commercial that states, "The only thing anyone really cares about is that first day. Everyone will be styling their faves." For decades, retail stores have capitalized on students' desire to present a new-and-improved, confident image of themselves—and their parents' willingness to indulge this desire.

The first-day-of-school outfit is romanticized among students of just about every age. More than January 1, the start of a new school year represents a chance for reinvention and resolution. A new pair of sandals or authentic baseball jersey can feel like the outward embodiment of a fresh beginning. And people don't just figuratively buy into this mystique—they literally open their wallets, too. This year, the average household is expected to spend \$673.57 total on back-to-school shopping, more than nearly every year since 2006, according to recently released data from the National Retail Federation. Of that total, \$235.39 is projected to be shelled out on clothing and accessories alone; in 2015, these items accounted for an average of \$217.82 per family. This year, families will spend more on apparel than on electronics and school supplies.

Much of this money is likely spent on colder-weather clothes that children have outgrown since last fall, but it's not hard to imagine a child thinking critically and carefully about what item in the shopping cart he or she will walk through the school doors wearing on day one. It's as if the first-day outfit sets the tone for the entire year, and there's an ingrained myth that it's possible for a huge transformation to occur over the summer—never mind that constant Snapchat stories and frequent Instagram selfies all but negate the possibility of a surprising change in appearance.

But on top of the expense of a new outfit and the limited possibility of a fantastical transformation, there's also very little chance that—unless a fedora is worn—anyone will remember someone else's first-day ensemble for very long. In 1946, the education theorist Edgar Dale famously published his “cone of experience.” The model identified a tiered system for how much a learner actually absorbs based on the type of content they are presented with. According to the theory—which has been cited as the basis for experiential learning—people remember more of what they see than of what they read or hear, but they remember less of what they see than of what they say, write, or do.

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Some have worked to debunk the pyramid, but at the very least, it is useful in understanding that experiences initiated by an individual—having a conversation, writing a sentence, or performing an action—are more likely to be remembered by that individual than an experience initiated by another person—reading someone's story, hearing someone's words, and seeing someone's outfit. Students are already cognitively predisposed to remember more about their own actions on the first day of school than those of someone else. And so, a classmate's outfit is likely to receive very little screen time in the mental movie of another student's first-day-of-school.

With this in mind, the first-day-of-school outfit seems like little more than a ritual passed down from one generation of advertisers to another. It's a performative act much like students tossing their caps in the air at the end of graduation—there's no explicit reason for this (and it actually creates the unnecessarily arduous task of having to find the mortarboard memento after the throw). However, thanks largely to Hollywood depictions of graduation and the ever-pressing millennial desire to rack up as many Facebook likes as possible, people toss their caps in the air without really thinking about why they are doing it in the first place. In the same way, the first-day outfit is a rite of passage that derives neither long-term benefit nor long-term recollection.

And yet, there may still be reason to dress up on the first day of class. Yes, there is little chance that anyone will remember what someone else wears, and yes, many students already know the vast majority of their classmates and don't feel the need to present a new image to old friends—but take a look at most back-to-school ads and magazine covers today, and they all emphasize one common trait: confidence. Regardless of whether impressing other students is at the top of someone's itinerary, there's a laundry list of factors that make the first day of school stressful, and perhaps an outfit can help to ease some of that tension.

A 2013 study published by Utah State University suggested that there is a correlation between athletes' and coaches' confidence about the team and the team's performance on the field. This conclusion isn't shocking at all—when someone is confident in their ability to perform a task, it seems incredibly logical that one would be able to complete that task with higher proficiency. On top of that, a 2015 paper published in the *Social Psychological and Personality Science Journal*, proved that people who wore more formal outfits performed better on cognitive tasks. Finally, a 2012 study from Northwestern University coined the term “enclothed cognition” to illustrate the psychological effect clothing has on its wearer. Researchers found that the symbolic meaning of an article of clothing—specifically a doctor's white lab coat—increased test-subjects' performance on cognitive tasks as a result of the qualities associated with the article of clothing itself. Taken together, these findings suggest that people who wear nicer, or school-specific,

clothing are prone to perform better academically. And so, there is actually some credence to the old “dress for success” mantra.

Above all else, thinking in advance about an outfit is one less thing to worry about on the morning of the first day. Plus, I know somewhere in my basement there’s a dusty old photo album filled with images from every first day of school I ever had. Wouldn’t it be nice to look back at those pictures and not have to cringe?